

King family's alliance with

Sons of slain civil-rights leader believe convicted killer's claims of innocence

WASHINGTON (AP) — The dreamer's son and the dream-killer spoke only a few minutes that day 13 months ago. But the prison meeting between a deathly ill James Earl Ray and Dexter King, son of Martin Luther King Jr., left many in the civil-rights movement cringing.

Ray peered into the eyes of Dexter King and mumbled, "I had nothing to do with shooting your father."

Replied King, seated 3 feet away, "I believe you."

In that meeting on March 27, 1997, America's first family of civil rights seemed to deliver absolution to a man who by nearly all accounts was responsible for killing King.

In the aftermath of Ray's death Thursday, the King family's relationship with the convicted murderer

stands as one of the more bizarre twists in the 30-year ordeal set off by King's shooting on a Memphis motel balcony.

"I simply don't understand it," said Rev. Samuel Billy Kyles, pastor of Monumental Baptist Church in Memphis and a former King aide who stood alongside the civil-rights leader as the fatal shots were fired in 1968.

"I would much rather have seen Dexter say, 'In the spirit of my father, I forgive you. Now tell me who else was involved.' But to say that he believes in Ray's innocence when everything points right there, I just..."

Kyles didn't complete the sentence. He didn't need to convey his incredulity, a sense shared by Julian Bond, another former King aide who now is board chairman of the NAACP.

"I'm mystified," Bond said last week of the King-Ray alliance. "I have never seen any evidence that shows that James Earl Ray did not pull the trigger. I'm open to the argument that others were involved, but to say Ray wasn't involved is impossible to me."

A high-school dropout and petty criminal, Ray confessed 11 months after the shooting to assassinating King, then fled to London. He was captured, brought back and tried. Three days after receiving a 99-year prison sentence, he recanted the confession.

The rifle used in the shooting was traced to him.

Ray's fingerprints were found in the room from where the shots were fired.

A witness testified seeing Ray at the hotel room moments

after the attack.

A House of Representatives committee investigated and concluded in 1978 that Ray shot King but that others may have been involved.

Attorney General Janet Reno, acting on a request by King's widow, agreed this year to consider a reinvestigation.

Last month, the district attorney's office in Shelby County, Tenn., released a voluminous report on the evidence and stated that the state "remains absolutely convinced of James Earl Ray's guilt."

"The evidence against him is overwhelming," the report read.

In recent years, Ray and his attorney William Pepper waged a high-profile campaign for a new trial, and members of the King family became some of Ray's strongest supporters in the effort.

Days after Dexter King met

with Ray, Martin Luther King III, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference his father helped found, joined his younger brother in proclaiming Ray's innocence.

"I have always felt it was a conspiracy," King III said at the time. "Mr. Ray has just been used as a patsy."

Following Ray's death, the family released a statement saying it was "deeply saddened" and again proclaiming his innocence.

Author Gerald Posner re-examined the assassination of the new book *Killing the Dream* and concluded that Ray, possibly with the help of others, did shoot King.

Posner said the King family's willingness to ignore the evidence and accept Ray's innocence represents "a final victory" for Ray.

"For the King family to exonerate Ray is a complete perversion of the truth," Posner said in an interview. "Sadly, it allows Ray to go to his grave knowing he pulled off the

Ray leaves observers baffled

murder and pulled one over on the King family."

Posner said the government campaign led by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI to discredit King may have made the family susceptible to the idea Ray was framed. He added that Pepper is a "very effective presenter of his evidence."

"He seems loaded with documents and new witnesses, but his information always falls on its face," Posner said. "It's sad the family is willing to put their stamp of approval to it. They've bought the whole kit."

Pepper could not be reached for comment.

So while Ray may have taken the truth with him to the grave, some like Bond are left to wonder why the people with the greatest reason to shun Ray chose to embrace him.

"I just hope the Kings know something that no one else knows," Bond said. "And I'd like them to tell the rest of us what the information is."



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Coretta Scott King, widow of slain civil-rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., talks to reporters as her son, Dexter, looks on following a meeting earlier this month with Attorney General Janet Reno.